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A Fool of a Knight, a Knight of a Fool: Malory's Comic Knights

GERGELY NAGY

The examination of three predominantly comic knights in Malory's *Morte Darthur* shows that the 'comic discourse' reinforces—rather than subverts—the serious 'heroic/tragic discourse' of the book. (GN)

What we feel after having read through Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* is surely not that it was funny. Especially under the lasting effect of the final books, the mood that stays with the reader is more likely to be tragic. On second or third reading, however, we observe that Malory's writing can nevertheless make us laugh; it almost certainly could amuse its medieval audience as well. Malory's humor is usually carefully controlled, in order not to destroy the 'strong and simple emotional responses'[1] that romance demands, and it is also expertly utilized to bring out the essentially serious theme(s) with which Malory is always concerned. He succeeds in yoking the potentially subversive, comic discourse and integrating it to serve his main tragic one.

Yet this comic discourse underlying the great tragic bulk of the book is definitely there and can be examined from a variety of standpoints. What justifies its approach as a 'sub-discourse' (instead of a subversive one) to Malory's overwhelmingly serious discourse of knightly deeds is its function, which as we will see is exactly to underpin that primary discourse. Humor is mostly restricted to the knighted world[2] where Malory's action takes place: the common people and churls are never of overmuch importance, not even when foregrounded to be laughed at. Churls are either completely disregarded (although there as background), killed off instantly when not subservient enough,[3] used as helpers and servants,[4] or used as foils to the nobility in being somehow naturally disposed towards treachery and evil.[5] Being humorous is a privilege of the aristocratic world. The devices that P.J.C. Field's stylistic approach[6] distinguishes as supplying the humor in Malory are active horseplay, dexterous verbal play on unknightliness, and irony and understatement as manifestations of 'the fundamental knightly quality of self-possession as an aspect of courage.'[7] Two of these considerations are

strictly stylistic, but bear directly on the chivalric nature of Malory's world. Active horseplay, however, concerns the action rather than the style: not the *way* Malory narrates but *what* he narrates. Narrative detail, characterization, and the placement of humorous moments in the conceptual framework of Malory's text can thus be seen as constituent elements of his comic discourse, which is added on to the stylistic effects he commands (as Andrew Lynch remarks, 'Malorian speech is a perfect medium for minimalist jokes'[8]). The aim of this article is to locate some focal points of the narrative discourse in Malory that build upon one another to create non-stylistic humor, the comic sub-discourse.

Justification that it is not only we (modern readers) who read humor into Malory's narrative (and that these details construct a discourse of their own) is offered by Malory's use of comic detail. The tone of the *Morte* is overwhelmingly serious and sustains various interpretations, but a critical consensus of sorts is that Malory's most important concern is knighthood. Andrew Lynch approaches this as the discourse of knightly combat,[9] while Beverly Kennedy argues that the text probes knights and knightly behavior to construct a hierarchy of conceptions of knighthood, a typology which can be used as a guideline in understanding the actions and evaluations of the book and the knights themselves.[10] Charles Moorman's view is that the 'tragic knights' in the *Morte* provide a means for Malory to examine the inherent conflicts, the discrepancies in the system of loyalties, that lead to the collapse of the Arthurian world.[11] Each of these frameworks is capable of accommodating a comic sub-discourse; but they are all built on assumptions drawn from the 'serious' discourse of the *Morte*. What follows is that the comic instances do not seriously compromise this and add meanings that do not subvert but significantly support the system. Malory is widely believed not to say one thing when he means another:[12] this straightforward style and discourse presumably would not have let him include scenes where knights participate in comic situations if he perceived these as compromising his main thrust of argument. Therefore he must have seen these (and written these) as integral parts of his text, relatively harmless to his main interests.[13] We are clearly meant to laugh along with Malory's heroes at such knights and situations that stand out: if the Arthurian gentlefolk are amused, the supposed 'gentle' readership (which both Malory and Caxton emphasize)[14] is also expected to be so, thus becoming more like these 'worshipful' people, following Caxton's admonition to 'doo after the good and leve the evyl.'

It is, of course, knights who supply the comic discourse in Malory's knighted narrative, knights whose adventures and persons are constructed

so that their effect stands in clear and direct opposition to the 'serious' discourse represented by the 'tragic knights.' The *Morte*'s Arthurian narrative is, as Lynch has recently pointed out, the story of *named* personages—essentially how those names and identities are established and maintained in acts of worship, knightly deeds.[15] Only a few of these named figures can be said to be *functionally* comical. King Mark, for example, who sometimes appears in comic situations (see below), fails to become such a consistently humorous figure: he is a foil to Arthur (concerning kingship), to other good knights (concerning knighthood, in which he is evidently lacking), and sometimes shares in the function of the comic knights when it serves the larger purpose of the narrative. Malory is not even above presenting Sir Lancelot himself in comical situations: for example, when in the infamous pavilion scene Sir Belleus 'wente that his lemman had layne in that bed, and so he layde hym adowne by sir Launcelot and toke hym in his armys and began to kysse hym...whan sir Launcelot felte a rough berde kyssyng hym he sterte oute of the bedde lyghtly' (*W* 259.29–33; 6.5). This scene certainly amuses the modern reader, and the attribution of a female role to the emerging best knight of the world might have had similar effects on the medieval reader: yet it does not undercut the most important aspects of Lancelot's representation, and it does not comment on knights and knighthood in any way. When Sir Alexander the Orphan has to be struck on the helm by an armed damsel to awake from a love-trance (*W* 647; 10.39), we have the same feeling of amusement:[16] yet the image of the knight beholding his lady was perhaps more conventional and natural to a medieval audience than it is to us, and so not humorous in itself. This comic role of the knights is only momentary in most cases—the amusement is in the situation, or the text's account of it, not in the knight himself.[17] Genuinely comic knights thus have to be measured against the majority of knights who are 'serious'; for readers to be able to conceive of them as 'comic,' a consistently maintained discrepancy has to be present between these two classes of knights. As Malory's world is mainly focused on action, systematic differences from the majority are possible in the realm of behavior of some knights, their conformation to or deviation from the directives of the knightly ideology that Malory's text constructs and maintains (and also in *how* they conform or deviate: King Mark also notably deviates, and still does not become comical).

As Malory's knights, the named figures gain name and worship through deeds of arms, knightly/military behavior, and the context for the knightly ideology becomes the context for this comic discrepancy: the comic knights are presented in the same arena, doing basically the same things, but with a

difference. Knights whom Charles Moorman termed 'Malory's Tragic Knights' are tragic because of their particular relationship to the institution of knighthood; 'comic knights' relate to knighthood (and are said to relate to it) in a different way. The three knights I will deal with—Sir Dagonet, Sir Kay, and Sir Dinadan—should be doing what any other knight does, but what they actually do and the way they do it mark them out; the account of their feats, their characters, is thus differentiated both from the discourse dealing with the 'good knights' and the 'evil knights' (the two sides of the serious coin). The tragic reading of Malory presupposes the governing function of the concept of knighthood: comic knights are comic because of a discrepancy between them and the knighthood that in Malory's understanding governs, or *should govern,* all knights. This is a tension that would have been comic to any medieval reader who perceived (as Caxton already did) the supreme thematic role of knighthood in the work. Comic knights thus produce a distinct querying discourse running parallel to the main discourse in which the concept of knighthood is crystallized and elevated to a governing position. This discourse, though it seems to run counter to the main one, is immediately contained by it.[18] The comical is integrated and even made a pillar of the 'serious,' the 'tragic.'[19]

The first comic knight I wish to examine, Sir Dagonet, is a perfect example to illustrate that the comic sub-discourse is constructed in exactly the same way as the serious one. The narrative of knighthood is a story of primarily *public* events and deeds: to make up name and worship, knights have to act publicly. To be comical, therefore, knights also have to *act* comically, and be judged as comic *publicly.* Sir Dagonet, King Arthur's fool, is pre-eminently suitable for this. His status as the King's 'foole' is frequently noted by the knights (*W* 462.26-32, 9.3; 496.25; 9.19; 587.27–29, 10.12; 603.15–24 10.20) and even by himself (*W* 498, 9.19). Beverly Kennedy points out that Dagonet is one of the 'household knights' of Arthur, with a function *inside* the court:[20] this function is predominantly public. It is reported that 'at every turnemente he bega[n] to make kynge Arthure to lawghe' (*W* 588.28–29, 10.12). However, it is not his 'professional foolery' (of which we do not hear any further details) but his adventures (another public forum of the discourse of knighthood) that make him into a comic figure.

It is of course significant that he is *Sir* Dagonet, a knight, and has adventures at all. Initiated into the chivalric system by none other than Arthur himself and loved very much by the king, Dagonet is officially a knight just like anyone else in Malory's story (*W* 588, 10.12; we should bear in mind that the person who made someone knight is immensely important: Lancelot

always regards the fact that he, too, was knighted by Arthur as a fact of great importance). Yet once Dagonet gets out into the roads and forests of Logres, as any other knight-errant, it becomes evident that he cannot *function* properly as a knight. Sir Kay gives him horse and armor first, and sends him after Sir La Cote Mal Tayle: in the following joust, Dagonet is promptly beaten (*W* 462, 9.3). Later, he is seen in Cornwall with two squires of his own, meeting the mad Tristram. He (along with the squires) is pushed into a well, and 'ryght so wete as they were [Tristram] made them lepe up [on their horses] and ryde their wayes' (*W* 496.35–7 9.19). He invariably loses all fights, and provides great amusement for other knights and all the court (knights: *W* 603, 10.20; Arthur's court: 588, 10.12); and even the shepherds laugh at him upon seeing his encounter with the mad Tristram (*W* 496, 9.19).

Sir Dagonet is not only inefficient in any function assigned to 'knights proper' by Malory: he does not even *try* to act very much like a knight. Twice he is so beaten that he nearly dies and evidently cannot continue fighting (by the mad Tristram: *W* 498, 9.19; by a strange knight: 589, 10.13); when unhorsed, he generally does not stand up to continue as a knight should (e.g. at *W* 462, 10.3, but also on other occasions). Furthermore, going back to the well to beat up the shepherds who laughed at his plight is surely not a very 'courteous' way to compensate for the disgrace of having been beaten by a 'foole naked' (*W* 498, 9.19). The fact that he was sent after Sir La Cote Mal Tayle is interpreted by the damsel as disgraceful and contemptuous (*W* 462.33–6, 10.3), in much the same terms as Gareth's damsel talks about the 'kychyn knave.' Dagonet is thus initiated into the knighted world, but is himself not 'knighted,' except in name. Certainly he cannot fulfill the military function of knights, let alone the judicial function or the role knights should play as members of the king's council. The last two he does not even try: his function is limited to providing a comic focus in the world of knight-errantry.

But on the other hand Sir Dagonet is apparently an important and, in his function, well-respected member of Arthur's court. He is reported to be 'the beste felow and the meryeste in the worlde' (by Sir Griflet: *W* 587.28–29, 10.12, a claim that can also be heard of Sir Dinadan, cf. *W* 692–93, 10.56). The other knights are worried about him, lest he should be hurt (as everybody recognizes he is *most likely* to be hurt: *W* 588, 10.12). This concern for Dagonet on the part of the Round Table knights demonstrates that it is not only Arthur who bears him a great love: he is a favorite of the entire court. He is 'the best fellow,' and that again is no faint praise. As Elizabeth Archibald has shown, the terms 'fellowship' and 'fellow' are emotionally highly charged words for Malory, meaning more than mere companionship.[21] They also

denote a bond of loyalty and love that is derived both from the friendship of the members of the knighted class and their feeling of being connected in the larger body of the Round Table as knights.[22] As 'merry' in Malory seems mostly to be associated with the condition of ease, mostly in (good) company (rest, cheer, at heart, at ease, even a 'merry lay,' *W* 384.21, 8.8; 'he myght never be myrry,' *W* 763.25, 10.80), Malory's discourse of knightly companionship definitely admits Dagonet despite all his shortcomings. After all, he knows what he is: when he reports on the meeting with the mad Tristram, he says that 'that foole and I, foole, mette togydir...' (*W* 498.26, 9.19). He knows his place perfectly well.

Dagonet's comic value obviously rests upon the serious distance between his two roles, the household knight and the knight-errant. It is all the more comical because Dagonet, as Arthur's fool with a function inside the court, should not even go questing; as he is absolutely unable to fulfill the functions of the knight-errant, he has no business in the world of adventures. The fact that Sir Kay sends him after Sir La Cote Mal Tayle is, as we saw, considered a disgrace by the damsel; Dagonet's presence in the world of the knights-errant disturbs the balance of that world. Arthur only makes him more comical by knighting him: Dagonet is mostly ridiculous because he is placed in a context totally alien to his own, given a name and function that he cannot substantiate according to the rules of the discourse into which he is thrown. Even the mad Tristram, the knight momentarily degraded to the condition of a 'foole naked' beats *this* fool advanced to knighthood: the discrepancy between what Dagonet nominally is and what he really is cannot be more obvious than in this scene. If he were simply 'Arthur's fool,' we would not laugh when he is beaten (in fact, we would not laugh at all, since we do not ever witness his foolery which pleases Arthur so much). If he were simply a knight, we would either pity or despise his series of defeats. We laugh because we know what a knight is supposed to be and do, and Dagonet is so obviously not like that. In this way Malory uses the comic sub-discourse articulated in such a character to assert with even greater force the values and criteria of knighthood with which he is predominantly concerned. But Dagonet still keeps his name, honorific and reputation: he is never once reprimanded for falling short of knightly standards. He is a genuine fool, but what a hilarious knight of a fool he makes!

In the character of Sir Kay the discrepancy is more pregnant because more sharply drawn in the figure of an active and competitive knight. As Kay is a genuine nobleman, he is in the public, aristocratic arena practically from the beginning of the *Morte*'s story. As seneschal he is definitely a

household knight, as his functions testify: he serves at Arthur's table at Allhallowmass (*W* 22, 1.10); he is sent to check the number of the Round Table knights present at an occasion (*W* 732–3, 10.68); and later he is charged with gathering news about the black barge floating on the Thames (actually the ship of the Maid of Astolat: *W* 1095–96, 18.20). He is named the 'governoure' of a group of knights at a tournament (*W* 525.28, 9.31; this is Malory's change: see 1476, n.525.27–28), is invited to the Queen's dinner (*W* 1048, 18.3, which is also Malory's addition: see 1597, n.1048.12–1049.23), and appears among the 'Queen's knights' in Guinevere's Maying party (*W* 1120, 19.1, cf. 1606, n.1120.25–31). In addition to performing 'administrative tasks,' he is credited with great deeds of arms in the first two books up to the *Lancelot* (*W* 19, 1.9; 23, 1.11; 28–30, 1.14; 75, 2.10; 128–29, 4.3; 221–22). He certainly makes his name and reputation in the initial stages of Arthur's setting up of the kingdom. Praised in remarkable terms by Arthur and Pellinore (*W* 129, 4.3; 131, 4.4), he is eventually made a Round Table knight (*W* 131, 4.5). From the *Lancelot* on, however, he is treated as an inferior, nearly like Dagonet, and from here on he loses most of his battles: his exploits not so spectacular, his name and worship are also compromised. In the first part of the *Morte*, there is a remnant of the tradition of Kay's heroic exploits, which Malory found in his source (the alliterative *Morte Arthure*) and even strengthened to give him greater heroic stature.[23] In the second part of the *Morte,* another tradition of Kay's inferiority, pride, boasting and arrogant nature becomes more prominent.[24] Indeed, Malory even changes his source at a key moment so that Kay suffers a defeat! (*W* 488, 9.15; see 1470, n.488.25).

This two-sidedness of Sir Kay is partly due to Malory and partly to his sources: still, in the second part of his text Kay does become a comic figure as a result of the serious tension between his two sides. As the story advances, he is steadily becoming just like Dagonet, only more self-conscious. He is reported to be very proud (*W* 275, 6.12), and coupled with his deteriorated achievement, his pride makes him on occasion even more comical than Dagonet. Pride is notably one of the vices that is most explicitly chastised in others, notably Lancelot, during the Quest of the Holy Grail; in Beverly Kennedy's phrase, pride is 'emblematic' of a prominent type of knighthood.[25] Although this aligns Kay with some other knights, it is also a fitting index of his failure to live up to the requirements of the knightly discourse. He presumes that his name is 'wydewhere...knowyn' (*W* 461.26, 9.2), as it is indeed—for his poor fighting ability. As Sir Gawtere puts it, 'he wenyth no knyght so good as he, and the contrary is oftyn proved' (*W* 275.18–19, 6.12). Kay also seems to know this (he can at least see the point when Lancelot

leaves him his armor: 'bycause of [Sir Lancelot's] armoure and shylde I am sure I shall ryde in pease' (*W* 275.4–5, 6.11), with the implication that he is aware he would not have peace otherwise; Kay reports his adoption of the disguise to the court at 287, 6.18), and Eugène Vinaver in one place in the Commentary asserts that Kay is 'the weakest of all knights' (*W* 1487, n.580.33–36). In the second part of the *Morte*, Kay is thus assimilated to the Dagonet-type comic character but draws even more force from the fact that he was not always like this, not even in Malory's text.

Not only is Kay proud and a bad fighter in the later books, falling short of the standards of both the military and judicial functions of knights, he is also 'ungentle,' another serious vice in a knight. The mocking Sir Kay, indeed, seems to be a stereotype in Arthurian literature and criticism, connected to the romance stock character of the bad steward and the slandering courtier in 'fair unknown' stories. K.S. Whetter suggests that Kay was unlucky enough to drop into the pot of these romance elements with his heroic, epic background, which this mode of literature could not easily tolerate; what is more, the romance hero as typified by Lancelot has a markedly different outlook. 'Kay's decline,' Whetter writes, 'is not only paralleled by but hinged upon Lancelot's rise.'[26] The second face of Sir Kay, which results in his being a comic character in the second part of the *Morte*, is thus in a sense a product of Malory's sources. His mocking arrogance toward Gareth (*W* 294–96, 7.1–2; 298, 7.4), La Cote Mal Tayle (*W* 459, 9.1: we remember that Kay sends Dagonet after La Cote Mal Tayle), and reportedly toward Percivale (*W* 814–15, 11.12–13; cf. 1529, n.814.13–815.11) is certainly a feature required by his thematic function in these 'fair unknown' situations where humiliation is among the trials of the young knight.[27] But Whetter argues convincingly that it is not this seneschal role that distorts Kay; indeed, he further suggests that he need not even be considered 'evil' in these cases.[28] The two sides of Kay's character, which ground the discrepancy that makes him comical in some instances, are well summarized by Sir Tristram: 'ye ar named the shamefullyst knyght of your tunge that now ys lyvynge. Howbehit ye ar called a good knyght, but ye ar called unfortunate and passyng overthwart of youre tunge' (*W* 488.18–21, 9.15). So shamefully ungentle indeed that Tristram wants none of his fellowship (*W* 489, 9.15)—another instance of the Malorian idea of fellowship and its connection to shame. An 'unfortunate' knight is no good company, let alone partner in fellowship: he does not share the characteristics and traits that make the fellowship cohere. 'Gentleness,' as Hyonjin Kim has shown, is also 'indispensable to the achievement and maintenance of "worship," or chivalric reputation.'[29]

A 'good knight, but...unfortunate': Sir Kay used to do great deeds, but his bad nature and vices, his misconduct against knighthood, cause him to be distanced from his own past and worship, and therefore, from his own name and status. Pride, as Kennedy points out, is a sin that explicitly *causes* misfortune.[30] Kay, originally a praise-worthy and accomplished hero, makes a fool of himself because he cannot or will not overcome his pride. The discrepancy between what Kay used to be and what he has become is too sharp not to be noticed: certainly Malory's characters notice it and are aware of the comic value when they scorn Kay (*W* 299–300, 7.5). Yet this scorn is not necessarily amusement: it may be that we laugh where the medieval audience felt disdain or even contempt, that we see a joke where they saw a moral exemplum. Kay is in some sense the victim of Malory's sources and a process of literary history: but surely Malory himself must have seen the discrepancy if he in the first part amplified Kay's accomplishment and in the second part diminished it. Kay's 'comic hamartia' rests on the fact that he falls spectacularly short of standards he is known to have once possessed. In opposition to Dagonet, the fool made a knight, we find Kay: the knight who makes a fool of himself. But even here, Malory directs further attention (both that of his readers and of his knights) to the criteria knights are supposed to fulfill, and foregrounds the discourse of knighthood and combat by the very shortcomings that this comic character is reported to have.

In the case of Sir Dinadan, the discrepancy that produces the comic value is much more subtle. Neither Dagonet nor Kay *want* to be funny in the way they *are*: Dinadan produces the comic discrepancy himself. His is, as a consequence, not even a 'real' but a crafted and artificial comedic role, long associated with Dinadan in Malory's source, the French Prose *Tristan*.[31] It was certainly thought to be amusing: Malory's characters are very well entertained, as doubtless his contemporary readers must also have been.[32] Dinadan's function is most emphatic in the *Tristram*, the long section of Malory's *Morte* that is most often seen as unsuccessful or redundant; however, Lynch has recently argued for its importance, and had asserted that Dinadan plays an important part in this no-less important tale.[33] He is also an example, a model that provides a paradigm for knightly conduct: far from being subversive, even his famous anti-chivalric jokes and malcontent behavior 'fits in with the text's own evaluative processes.'[34]

Dinadan is, as Kay used to be, a genuinely good knight, though by no means among the very best. His fighting performance is solid, though of course he occasionally succumbs to better knights. We see him in individual jousts (*W* 503, 9.22; 507, 9.24; 508, 9.24; 553, 9.41; 583, 10.10; 614, 10.25; 696,

10.57), battle (*W* 506, 9.23), tournaments (*W* 347, 7.29; 523–4, 9.30; 653, 10.40; 657, 10.42; 665, 10.47; 669, 10.49; 733, 10.68), and in two victories against the notorious Sir Breuse sans Pité (*W* 553, 9.41; 614, 10.25—a good credential in itself and reflecting well on Dinadan's knighthood). He is reportedly adept on horseback, which suggests long practice (*W* 583, 10.10), and is a Round Table knight (*W* 733, 10.68). He thus fulfils the military function of knights, and, in undertaking fights with the lawless Sir Breuse and by his promise to help abolish Morgan le Fay's evil custom (*W* 597, 10.17), he also shows himself active in the judicial role. Arthur, appropriately, values him highly (*W* 760, 10.79). Dinadan also observes most of the customs of the knights-errant: he jousts when required to 'of hys knyghthode' (*W* 507.12, 9.24) and for the 'honoure of all women' (*W* 553.16, 9.41); despises and scorns cowardice and hypocrisy; and is faithful to his chosen lord, Tristram (*W* 604, 10.20) and Arthur. His assessment by other knights is consistent: he is considered to be a 'good knight and a jantyll,' 'jantyll, wyse, and a good knyght,' who is 'lovynge unto all good knyghtes—all good knyghtis lovyth his felyship' (*W* 605.11, 10.20; 605.19–20, 10.20; 660.2, 10.44; 692.28–29, 10.56; see also 665, 10.47). These assessments highlight the key words and concepts of Malory's knightly discourse.[35]

Sir Dinadan would be a perfectly ordinary 'good knight' without any comic value—if only he were not an accomplished 'skoffer and a gaper' (*W* 665.7–8, 10.47), a well-known jester within knightly circles. He plays practical jokes (as when he makes the cowardly King Mark believe that Dagonet is actually Lancelot: Mark flees without a fight, *W* 587–88, 10.12),[36] engages in humorous dialogues of wit, and, most importantly, gives voice to common-sense objections to knighthood's conventions.[37] He attacks various rules and suppositions that govern errant knighthood: the custom that knights should joust with each other without any cause whatsoever (see *W* 507–508, 9.24; 604–5, 10.20); that knights should undertake whatever task comes their way (*W* 505, 9.23; 581, 10.8), even proclaiming this to be no shame: 'hit is ever worshyp to a knyght to refuse that thynge that he may nat attayne' (*W* 581.24–26, 10.8). He also rejects the courtly convention that no knight can fight and win worship without the inspiration of his lady love (*W* 688–89, 10.55), and he is brave enough to discuss this at length with one of the greatest of 'inspirers,' Isoud (*W* 693–4, 10.56), flatly refusing to fight with three knights for her sake (*W* 694, 10.56).

Dinadan's character had always had this feature of 'anti-chivalric satire,' but Malory in fact toned him down: in the French source his role was much more subversive and potent. Malory excised most of his speeches and abridged

others, thereby removing the danger that Dinadan might seriously question the idea of knighthood that Malory so carefully built up: Malory thus easily contains Dinadan's grumbling. Thus Sir Dinadan becomes 'a jester *within* the knightly system.'[38] What Dinadan urges is merely to act with ordinary prudence, without shame or dishonor. He advises knights never to fight against a vastly superior opponent, or against great odds for trivial reasons, or in anger.[39] What these instances of practical wisdom (and in fact the whole career of Dinadan) illustrate is how to live in a world where there *are* vastly superior knights: Dinadan becomes 'a model for all of how to achieve benign symbiosis with greater figures'[40] (that is, those who will *always* be greater than any particular knight). Thus, he provides honorable escape routes for knights who cannot all be as good as Tristram or Lancelot (always a sizeable audience), 'opens up the avenues to worship for others.'[41] But both readers and 'all good knyghtis' know his real exploits: while he mocks knight-errantry, true love, and the conventions of knighthood, in Larry Benson's words he 'simultaneously affirms their value' and 'shares the system of values...he comically attacks.'[42] The comic discrepancy, thus, arises from the difference between what Dinadan does and what he says. Once he even asserts that though he is 'nat of worship [himself, he] love[s] all tho that bene of worship' (*W* 618.2–3, 10.27)—a case of the 'verbal play on unknightliness' that Field classed as a type of stylistic humor.[43] Dinadan professes to be what he *should not be,* and in fact *is not*—something which everybody knows. It is he himself who creates the comic discrepancy; or rather, it is Malory who lets him, and uses the sub-discourse this sets up to 'remind the hearers of a shared value-system which is beyond [such] lay analysis.'[44]

Reinforcing the stress that he put on the idea of fellowship, Malory also makes one of Dinadan's customs to be 'prevy with all good knyghtes' (*W* 617.28, 10.27; cf. 1495, n.617.28) and play jests on them or engage with them in teasing each other, actions which are by no means normal or 'serious' in the Arthurian knights' world. In the course of these pranks, he takes the liberty of calling sir Lancelot 'the olde shrew' (*W* 665.23–24, 10.47) and 'so false that [he] can never beware of [him]' (*W* 670.3–4, 10.49; this is not in the source, see 1507, n.670.3–4). He asks Lancelot, 'what devyll do ye in this contrey?' (*W* 668.17–18, 10.48; he adds the supposed reason for his annoyance: 'here may no meane knyghtes wynne no worship for the,' *W* 668.18–19) and says that Tristram 'fare[s]...as a man [that] were oute of hys mynde,' and asserts that 'in all the worlde ar nat such two knyghtes that ar so wood as ys sir Launcelot and ye, sir Trystram!' (*W* 508.1–2, 4–6, 9.24). He explains that

once in Lancelot's company he was worked so hard that he kept to his bed 'a quarter of a yere' (*W* 508.8, 9.24). The great knights reply with good-natured retorts, and play their own jests on him: Tristram, for example, traveling incognito, pretends to be a coward, and when asked by Dinadan what he is then doing bearing spears, answers that he would give them to some good knight at the tournament. If Dinadan does well, even *he* might receive them (*W* 695, 10.57). The most memorable of these jests is doubtless when Lancelot attacks and unhorses Dinadan in female clothes, then dresses him up in them and presents him to the court: the queen 'lowghe, that she fell downe; and so dede all that there was' (*W* 670.1–2, 10.49). These delightful scenes bring out the humor of the other great knights and make them look more human, closer to the innumerable lesser knights. The function Malory assigns to his 'abridged Dinadan' is something of a moral and practical humorist, a witty partner who jokes to relax the highly idealized and sometimes unreal impression of knighthood those great knights would perhaps otherwise give. In the course of this, Dinadan not only relieves but also reasserts the main discourse: he never poses any serious threat, on the one hand because his japes serve to highlight points of the serious discourse (debatable points in Malorian knighthood, which are perhaps not taken entirely seriously by the knights themselves either), and on the other because he himself is known to fulfill the criteria for good knights: although he acts as a knight, strictly speaking, should not act, given that he is an accomplished fighter and the points criticized are minor, he can readily be forgiven and turned into a device of fun instead of a serious anti-chivalric critic in the knightly society. In summary, Tristram calls him 'the beste felawe that I know...the myrryeste knyght...and the maddyst talker' (*W* 692.28, 693.6–8, 10.56). Dinadan is not a fool, nor does he make a fool of himself by his opinions: he is a good knight fooling around sometimes.

We have seen why and how the three special foci of the comic discourse in Malory's work—Sir Dagonet, Sir Kay, and Sir Dinadan—function as comical characters. In each case, there is a comic discrepancy, either genuine or artificial, between what they, as knights, *should* be according to the Malorian idea of knighthood, and what they *are* or *pretend* to be. This comic discourse is above the level of stylistic humor that Field has examined, though it often includes stylistic instances. The effects of these performances encompass narrative detail, characterization and stylistic features; thus they give a complex picture of how Malory constructs and utilizes the comic discourse in his text. All three of the centers of this discourse are defined and receive comic value in the general conceptual framework of the book,

embedded in and subordinated to the 'serious' discourse of knightly achievement and conduct, in terms of their relationship to knighthood. Anomalies are only visible and effective against a massive and relatively unified background; Malory's serious discourse is not compromised by the comic knights and what they stand for. In fact, we can think of them as tension-breaking devices, which in their actual use are taken up and made into pillars of the serious narrative by highlighting the system of knighthood, its overruling importance, and even the narrative discourse Malory uses to establish and maintain his knightly ideology. The point is in each case exactly that an undercurrent of any specific narrative element (jousting, prowess, love, courage) should be established, with a regularity and system which shows itself as a variation of the main discourse; and that then this discourse should be shown to be incorporated into the first one (Dagonet's failures still leave him well liked, Dinadan's grumbling still does not make knights any worse).

Malory's tragic knights, according to Charles Moorman, are tragic because of the nature of their knighthood, shot through with contradiction, and their failure to 'rise above' this knighthood, 'to examine it and themselves in the light of its obvious failures, and so they perish clutching to a way of life, to a system that...has failed to provide its promised ends.'[45] They either attempt absolute, though impossible, adherence to the ideal of knighthood, or, not seeing clearly what it is, they are guilty of violent and serious misconduct against it. They finally 'explode' knighthood by revealing its disfunctionality and are unable to see how to transform it into an applicable and most noble ideal. Comic knights, on the other hand, cannot become such figures because they cannot even become 'knights proper'—or, in Dinadan's case, they consciously distance themselves from knighthood. They commit insignificant—not destructive or serious—misconduct, which is not dangerous as a pull of tragedy, because the knights themselves (in falling short of Malory's and knighthood's requirements) are not taken fully seriously in their potentially destructive capacity.

The fixed element in the case of both the tragic and the comic register is the Malorian idea of knighthood as a governing concept, determining the value of the knight relating to it, and the discourse of knighthood within which Malory articulates these values and concepts and through which he builds up his narrative around knighthood. Malory himself is essentially serious and writes a serious book. He is wholly dedicated to the serious presentation of knighthood, but if he believed for a moment that allowing such humor and comedy to be left in his text could disturb this picture by

dangerously compromising the tone of his writing, he would surely rather have cut these too. Knighthood holds Malory's heart: even to be ridiculous, one has to be a knight in his world.

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NOTES

1 P.J.C. Field, *Romance and Chronicle: A Study of Malory's Prose Style* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1971), p. 109.
2 Here (and elsewhere in this paper) I use the term 'knighted' as a parallel to the widely used term 'gendered' to suggest that knighthood determines the identities of the figures in Malory's narrative similar to the way gender determines subjects. Indeed, people in Malory become fitting 'subjects' for narration exactly through being 'knighted,' by their membership in this institution.
3 As is Meliagaunt's porter: *W* 1127, 19.4. Quotations from and references to Malory's text are keyed to the following edition: *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, ed. Eugène Vinaver, rev. P.J.C. Field, 3rd ed., 3 vols., paged consecutively (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); references will henceforward be given parenthetically in the text. I give page (and where exact reference is needed, line) numbers as well as Caxton's book and chapter numbers.
4 For example the great number of dwarfs: in some cases they can achieve considerable appreciation, as Gareth's dwarf does.
5 As are the churls who take over the Red City because of King Harmaunce's gentility towards them: *W* 712, 10.61.
6 Field, *Romance and Chronicle*, pp. 109–12.
7 Field, *Romance and Chronicle*, p. 111.
8 Andrew Lynch, *Malory's Book of Arms: The Narrative of Combat in Le Morte Darthur* (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 1997), p. 131.
9 Lynch, *Book of Arms*.
10 Beverly Kennedy, *Knighthood in the Morte Darthur* (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 1985).
11 Charles Moorman, 'Malory's Tragic Knights,' *Medieval Studies* 27 (1965): 117–27.
12 Malory, however, stresses such double-dealing when he treats acts of disguise and deception which he thematizes explicitly and classifies as treachery: see e.g. Lynch, *Book of Arms*, p. 135 concerning King Mark.
13 His dealing with potentially subversive details is very well illustrated in the figure of Sir Dinadan, which he on the one hand cut down to size from a rather more

serious critic of knightly ways in his French source (see Vinaver's opinion in *W* 1447–48 and in the Commentary at separate instances), and on the other hand used in much more affirmative ways than it appears at first sight (as Lynch argues in *Book of Arms*, pp. 98–103; see below).

14 See Hyonjin Kim, *The Knight without the Sword: The Social Landscape of Malorian Chivalry* (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2000), pp. 111–25 and Lynch, *Book of Arms*, p. 11.

15 Lynch, *Book of Arms*, pp. 1–15.

16 Field calls the Belleus episode 'the only incident in which...dangerous laughter at a character's expense has been deliberately courted,' and also mentions the scene with Alexander and the lady; *Romance and Chronicle*, pp. 109–11.

17 Field draws attention to the fact that 'the explicitly humorous passages are almost all in dialogue'; *Romance and Chronicle*, p. 109.

18 See Lynch, *Book of Arms*, p. 99.

19 Cf. Larry D. Benson's argument about the balance of the historical/narrative 'tragic' and the thematic 'comic' aspects in Malory's final books: *Malory's Le Morte Darthur* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 208–09.

20 Kennedy, *Knighthood*, p. 36. Kennedy also includes Kay on this list.

21 Elizabeth Archibald, 'Malory's Ideal of Fellowship,' *Review of English Studies* n.s. 43 (1992): 316–17. [311–28]

22 Archibald, 'Fellowship,' 316.

23 See *W*1341, n.131.12-13; for the tradition, see R.S. Loomis, ed., *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages: A Collaborative History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), pp. 18, 34, 115, 389–91, 432, 433.

24 See Loomis, ed., *Arthurian Literature*, pp. 34, 39, 62–63, 181, 186–87, 199, 362, 367–68, 403, 430, 432, 454, 499, 525.

25 Kennedy, *Knighthood*, p. 256.

26 K.S. Whetter, 'Reassessing Kay and the Romance Seneschal,' *Bibliographical Bulletin of the International Arthurian Society* 51 (1999): 362 [343–363].

27 Cf. Kennedy, *Knighthood*, p. 129.

28 Whetter, 'Reassessing Kay,' 344–52, 353, 360.

29 Kim, *Knight without the Sword*, p. 129.

30 Kennedy, *Knighthood*, pp. 235, 293, quoting Walter Hilton on p. 302 and Richard Rolle's *Book of Vices* on p. 303.

31 See Loomis, ed., *Arthurian Literature*, pp. 344, 353, 391.

32 Cf. Field, *Romance and Chronicle*, p. 111.

33 See Lynch, *Book of Arms*, pp. 79–107, esp. pp. 98–103.

34 Lynch, *Book of Arms*, p. 99.

35 On the role of 'gentleness,' see Kim, *Knight without the Sword*, p. 129 (referred to above).

36 Dinadan is thus seen to be active in staging and operating the comic sub-discourse. Dagonet, to be fair, contributes to this liberally: he puts on a good show which works to frighten King Mark out of his wits.

37 Benson, *Malory's Le Morte Darthur*, p. 112.
38 Field, *Romance and Chronicle,* p. 111.
39 Kennedy, *Knighthood,* pp. 181–84.
40 Lynch, *Book of Arms,* p. 103.
41 Lynch, *Book of Arms,* p. 100.
42 Benson, *Malory's Le Morte Darthur*, pp. 112–13; Kennedy, *Knighthood,* pp. 181–84.
43 Field, *Romance and Chronicle,* p. 111. Field in fact connects this type of Malorian humor (with one instance as exception, which is connected to Kay) exclusively to Dinadan.
44 Lynch, *Book of Arms,* p. 101.
45 Moorman, 'Tragic Knights,' 125.